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Table of Contents

The Failure of the Pullman Strike and Its Effect on the U.S. Labor Reform Movement

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In 1894, in Pullman, Illinois, the workers of the Pullman Palace Car Company went on strike. This event, which began as an ordinary labor dispute, escalated into one of the most important and far-reaching events in United States labor history.

The Pullman Palace Car Company was founded in 1867 by George Pullman. By 1893, it was the foremost railroad car manufacturing company in the United States and employed 5,500 laborers. In 1880, George Pullman established the town of Pullman, just south of Chicago. Pullman was a company-owned town and Pullman workers were required to live there. Citizens were not allowed to own property. Rents for Pullman houses were twenty-five percent higher than rents in neighboring communities. Some houses were of poor quality. This lack of freedom began to create discontent among the people. In 1893, a financial panic hit the United States. Over 4,000 workers were initially laid off by Pullman and wages were drastically slashed. By April 1894, Pullman was able to rehire some men, bringing his total to 3,300. The wages, however, remained low, and rents were unchanged; that month, Pullman workers began to organize into local unions.

On May 7, 1894, a committee of Pullman workers presented their grievances to the company. Not only were their grievances dismissed, but three days later, three workers from that committee were laid off. That night, the Pullman workers voted to strike, and on May 11, Pullman was forced to close the plant. Over 3,000 workers joined the strike.

One year earlier, in June 1893, Eugene Debs had founded an organization called the American Railway Union (ARU). It attracted laborers who wanted more influence in workplace issues and by late 1893 could claim 150,000 members. Over the next year, the ARU became one of the strongest labor unions in the country.

In June 1894, the ARU joined forces with the Pullman strikers. This move gave national prominence to the Pullman grievances. It also put the commanding and popular presence of Debs at the front of the Pullman struggle. Throughout June, the ARU attempted to arbitrate with Pullman managers. Time and again they were refused. On June 22, the ARU issued an ultimatum to the Pullman Palace Car Company: address the workers' grievances or a boycott of Pullman cars would begin on June 26. Pullman again turned away the arbitrators and on June 26, all members of the ARU across the country were instructed to stop handling Pullman cars.

Because of the influence that the ARU had over railway workers, the union was able to halt the railway traffic in and around Chicago. The boycott expanded rapidly, as thousands of workers declined to run trains with Pullman cars attached. By June 28, more than 18,000 workers were participating in the boycott. Many of them were fired. The Pullman strike and boycott became a nationwide disruption.

Although state governments normally handled labor disputes, the federal government became involved in the railroad boycott of 1894 in late June, when workers refused to handle United States mail trains because Pullman cars were attached. The government was notoriously unsympathetic to labor unions and United States Attorney General Richard Olney responded to the halted mail traffic by issuing an injunction, called the Omnibus Indictment, on July 2, 1894. It forbade any striker or union representative to attempt to persuade another employee to abandon his job.

On July 1 and 2, strikers and supporters gathered peacefully in Chicago to continue to enforce the boycott. On July 2, the indictment was read to them and they were asked to disperse. The people refused and, in an unprecedented act, federal troops were sent to Chicago on July 3 to control the mobs, which, up until that point, had not rioted. Not only was this the first time the federal government had intervened in a labor issue, but it was also acting against the wishes of John Altgeld, the governor of Illinois, who strongly believed that state forces could handle the situation. Angered that the troops had been sent, the people began to riot. On July 5, seven buildings were burned; the following day, a mob of 6,000 set 700 railway cars on fire; and on July 7, another mob assaulted the state militia. The militia fired into the crowd, killing four and wounding twenty. On July 8 more federal troops were sent to control the violence and the mobs were ordered again to disperse. Finally, two days later, Eugene Debs was arrested and all the riots ended. The boycott was over and train traffic resumed. In total, thirteen people had been killed and 53 wounded. On August 2, 1894, the strikers returned to work.

The immediate consequences of the strike were insignificant. Pullman workers had to return to their jobs, still hampered by high rents and low wages. The ARU had been defeated and its strength dwindled. Furthermore, the federal government had shown definitively its position towards labor unions and laborers. With the deployment of federal troops and the willingness to use lethal force, it became clear to the nation that the wealthy capitalist would be supported before the laborer.

The strike, however, had unexpected and enormous long-term consequences. It showed the American people the power they held in their hands. With their vast numerical superiority over the upper classes, laborers could join together and fight as a powerful force. Even if it had been for only a few weeks, the laborers had deeply disrupted the traffic of the nation with the boycott of the railroads. Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, the Pullman strike and

resulting boycott awakened Americans to the labor problems affecting people all over the country. With the increased publicity of the Pullman workers' grievances, more Americans realized that there was a definite labor problem and that labor was long overdue to reform. The Pullman strike sparked an era of labor reform that changed the face of capitalist America forever.

[From History Matters, "Broken Spirits: Letters on the Pullman Strike," historymatters.gmu.edu (July 3, 2002); At Home in a House Divided, "U.S. Strike Commission: The Pullman Strike: Its Causes and Events," www.museum.state.il.us (Dec. 31, 1996); The Illinois Labor History Society, "Gene Debs and the American Railway Union," www.kentlaw.edu (July 3, 2002); Kansas University, "The Pullman Strike," www.ku.edu (Mar. 3, 1998); Almont Lindsey, *Pullman Strike, the story of a Unique Experiment and of a Great Labor Upheaval*; Lause's Links, "Eugene Victor Debs," www.geocities.com (July 3, 2002); Ohio State University, "Events of the Pullman Strike," w912.history.ohio-state.edu (July 3, 2002); Colston E. Warne, *The Pullman Boycott of 1894*.]

John Peter Altgeld: Representative of the Working Man

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Governor John Peter Altgeld was a reasonably well-known man in Illinois because he was involved in many labor disputes including the Haymarket Square Riot of 1886 and the Pullman Strike of 1894. Governor Altgeld was an advocate for the working man and did what he thought was right even when it jeopardized his political career. Governor Altgeld once said, "I do not know how I will act, but I will do what I think is right."

Peter Altgeld was born in Germany on December 30, 1847, and died in Joliet, Illinois, on March 12, 1902. Altgeld came to the United States as a baby, brought over by his parents to Ohio. At sixteen, Altgeld joined the Union Army and served until the end of the American Civil War. After that he worked as a common laborer and then became a schoolteacher.

Altgeld then studied law and became a lawyer. He advocated prison reform and wrote *Our Penal Machinery and its Victims* in 1884. He was then elected a judge of the superior court of Cook County (1886-1891) and became its chief justice. Altgeld began his political career around 1884 when Grover Cleveland was first elected president. Altgeld was a member of the Democratic Party. He was elected governor in 1893 and served one term to 1897.

When Governor Altgeld said, "I do not know how I will act, but I will do what I think is right," he was referring to his review of the Haymarket Square Riot anarchists' request for clemency. Almost as soon as he was elected governor, Altgeld began getting visitors and memos asking for the pardon of Oscar Neebe, Samule Fielden, and Michael Schwab. Among their advocates were Clarence Darrow and Judge Samuel P. McConnell. These men tried to convince

Altgeld that, even though it would jeopardize his prospects for becoming a senator, it was the right thing to do and that Altgeld should not take his political career into consideration. Altgeld found that these attempts to sway him in his decision were unnecessary and the criticisms to his willingness to do his duty intolerable.

After careful analysis of the trial of the three men, Altgeld found that the convictions of Oscar Neebe, Samule Fielden, and Michael Schwab were unjust because the jury was packed, the jurors were not competent, and the trial judge did not grant a fair trial. He pardoned the three men fully on June 26, 1893. Altgeld received much criticism from conservatives due to his decision.

Also in June 1893 the first major national union was formed: the American Railway Union (ARU). Its goal was to unite many different "craft" or "skill" unions. Many workers of the Pullman factory near Chicago joined the ARU. The formation of this union marked a turning point in Illinois labor history. The country's economy was failing in a depression and on Labor Day 1893 John Altgeld said, "Times will be getting even worse." John Altgeld decided to allow laid off laborers to compete among themselves for job opportunities; however, he added, "Let me say that it will be the duty of all public officials to see to it that no man is permitted to starve on the soil of Illinois." When strikes happened in Illinois, Governor Altgeld sent the state militia out to help control riots and protests in which people were using force or felt threatened.

A seemingly small incident started on May 11, 1894, when 2000 employees of the Pullman Company went on strike. The police did not request that state troops be sent to quell the protests. Governor Altgeld was ready to move upon the request of anyone who was endangered by the strikers and finally did send Illinois militia to free train cars held by the ARU boycott to show support to the Pullman strikers.

But there were false reports sent to Washington, D.C., by the General Managers Association of Chicago Railroads. At 3:30 P.M., July 3, 1894, upon President Cleveland's command, federal troops were sent to Chicago. Governor Altgeld was extremely insulted by the move of federal troops into Illinois without his consent or that of the Illinois legislature. The governor protested this movement of federal troops as unconstitutional. Soon after the deployment of federal troops Altgeld sent a telegram to Grover Cleveland saying, ". . . So far as I have been advised, the local officials have been able to handle the situation. But if any assistance were needed, the State stood ready to furnish 100 men for every one man required. . . . Notwithstanding these facts, the Federal Government has been applied to by men who had political and selfish motives. . ." Altgeld felt that the Constitution was violated when federal troops were sent in without request. He considered this criminal.

Altgeld died at fifty-four. Throughout his life he did what he thought was right and often jeopardized himself through his liberal idealism. The main focus of his life was on his pardoning of the Haymarket anarchists and his involvement in Illinois labor history.

[From Harry Barnard, *Eagle Forgotten*; Rosemary Laughlin, *The Pullman Strike of 1894*.]

The Haymarket Tragedy

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Chicago's evolution into a large city helped to place it as one of the nation's industrial leaders. Yet with this role came the responsibility of handling the many instances of labor unrest. When looking at the history of labor in Illinois, one must mention the incident that occurred at Haymarket on May 4, 1886. This single meeting brought about the first Red Scare in America and set back a growing labor movement.

So often in history the past directly influences the future and the Haymarket incident is no exception. For decades men cried for an eight-hour workday, and often it seemed as if these cries fell on deaf ears. In 1836 the *National Laborer* reported that twelve hours was too great a span of time to be engaged at the workplace, and claimed that "eight hours daily labor is more than enough for any man to perform." This ideal remained an issue for over the next fifty years. Yet the strength of these labor movements often rode in waves, causing varied effectiveness throughout the years. Some who were angered with the nation's current trends and with good reason, a great majority of the labor laws were inadequate. Out of this frustration rose those who chose to take a more radical view in regards to labor. Examples include socialist groups that contained elements of communism, socialism, and anarchism. These groups agreed that the capitalism and the wage system exploited the worker. This was the historical background of the events that occurred on that May 4, 1886, and many of these facts influenced the emotion and anarchist leaders of the Haymarket meeting.

Chicago began its history of labor unrest in 1877 when the forceful attempt by police to break up a strike resulted in the death of several workers. This event lead to hostile feelings between the two groups and many workers began arming themselves for protection. A similar series of events lead to the Haymarket tragedy. On May 1, 1886, workers in Chicago went on strike for an eight-hour workday; this day passed without incident. On May 3 a follow up rally was held by the striking Lumber Shovers' Union, and August Spies took the responsibility of the rally's speaker. Nearby was the main factory of the McCormick Reaper Works whose union workers had been locked out since February. Part of Spies' crowd broke away to join these workers in heckling their union replacements. The police response resulted in the death of two workers. August Spies, who believed at the time that six men had died, was outraged and wrote in his anarchist newspaper that if the strikers had been armed with "good weapons and a single dynamite bomb not one of the (guilty party) would have escaped his well deserved fate." Spies sent notice through his paper that a meeting would be held on May 4 in protest to police brutality.

The meeting was set to be held at Haymarket Square which lay between Des Plaines and Halstead streets in Chicago. This area could hold about twenty thousand people, yet only a disappointing 2,000-3,000 showed up to the meeting. Early confusion concerning who was the first scheduled speaker contributed to the small attendance. Much of the meeting went without incident until the police tried to break up the meeting with only a few minutes remaining and with only a few hundred spectators left. During this time a member of the audience threw a bomb amidst the officers. The bomb itself and the confusion and mayhem that ensued claimed the lives of eight police officers and terribly wounded others. This event caused widespread fear across the nation, and many citizens sentiments echoed that of the Chicago *Tribune* that "no

effort should be spared until every man in the conspiracy has been clutched." Unfortunately, this pursuit proceeded blind to justice.

Scholars often consider the Haymarket trial as one of the most notorious miscarriages of law in American history. The actual bomb thrower was never found but the idea of not prosecuting anyone was unfathomable. In 1887 on November 11, August Spies, Albert Parsons, Adolph Fischer, and George Engel were hanged, not because of evidence linking them to the crime, but merely because of their political views. The executions of these men transformed them from anarchist into martyrs, not only in this country but throughout the world. The three remaining men who were imprisoned in relationship to this crime were pardoned by Governor John Peter Altgeld (with the exception of Louis Lingg who committed suicide the day before the hangings). Yet the hostility about this issue in Chicago was so strong that this decision ruined the Governor's political career.

When one looks back on the Haymarket Tragedy one must recognize that this single violent issue did more than just get "revenge" for the worker. Not only was innocent life lost on both sides but anarchists and those of similar political views were feared for the first time. This fear and anger ran so deep that innocent men were killed just to satisfy this witch hunt. This event also greatly hindered labor movements across the nation, proving that May 4, 1886, at Haymarket Square did not simply affect the people of Chicago but it affected the citizens of America.

[From Corrine J. Naden, *The Haymarket Affair Chicago, 1886*; Dave Roediger and Franklin Rosemont, *Haymarket Scrapbook*; Stevenson Swanson, *Chicago Days*.]

The Packinghouse Jungle

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You leave for work before 7 A.M. The walk to work takes you past pens full of animals. An awful smell hangs in the air. There is no green plant to be seen in any part of the neighborhood. You spend your whole day in labor which could be cold and damp, or could involve the chance of serious injury, and all for as little as fifteen cents an hour. Many unskilled workers in the meat-packing industry in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century went through this every week. The huge system they worked in was based on one thing—the refrigerated rail car. Thanks to it and the refrigerated steamer, meat-packing of the late 1870s turned from a regional into an international business. The workers came from many backgrounds—Ireland, Germany, Poland, Lithuania, what is now the Czech Republic, and what is now Slovakia. Many could not speak English. All of them found deplorable conditions, both in the homes and the factories of Packingtown, a part of Chicago's industrial South Side. Unions and strikes failed to unite the skilled and unskilled workers. Worst of all, *The Jungle* written by Upton Sinclair to expose the plight of the meat-packing workers, only succeeded in passing meat inspection laws. With meat-packing's transformation into a large business, workers became highly diverse and protested their working conditions through strikes, being trapped in a situation that *The Jungle* could not change.

Meat-packing following the Civil War is divisible into two periods—before and after the refrigerated rail car. Prior to the refrigerated rail car, meat-packing was a regional industry. Few plants had more than 100 employees. There were a number of plants, each working mainly

during cool weather. Without a way to refrigerate meat, the meat-packing industry could not change. When the refrigerated rail car was perfected in the late 1870s, meat packing became an industry that reached across the nation. Five huge companies, Swift, Armour, Morris, Cudahy, and Schwarzschild and Sulzberger, controlled most of the industry. No other company controlled more than one percent of the market. Immigrants poured in to work for them. The Irish and German "all-around" butchers were forced to give way to the new system. Although skilled labor remained and humans did most of the work, a mass production system had begun. A worker in a cattle killing gang filled one of the 78 jobs, each a minute task repeated thousands of times daily. However, with the bulk of the work requiring little skill, hiring was casual. Foremen went to the crowds waiting at the gate for work and chose the healthy. Workers could lose their jobs only a few hours after getting them. This world of mass production, monopolies, and uncertain employment, is the world Upton Sinclair wrote about in *The Jungle*.

The workers of Packingtown lived in poverty, relying on boarders and child laborers for financial survival. The main reason for their poverty was the irregular employment the packing plants offered. If you were injured, you would not get your job back when you recovered. Luckily for the workers, the huge city of Chicago offered opportunities to earn money outside of work. One way was to take in boarders. Sadly, this system increased congestion, aggravating the already poor health conditions. The boarding system, like everything else in Packingtown, remained within the ethnic groups. Although they may have lived in America, the workers often maintained strong ties to their homelands. Schools, churches, even marriage, were within a single ethnic group. Efforts to "Americanize" the immigrants met with little success, and the problems of Packingtown remained for years. Another way for families to earn additional income was child labor. Children went to work at fourteen, the earliest legal age, at least in the meat-packing plants. Other industries were more lenient. Slowly, children became casual

laborers, much like their parents. Child labor quickly weakened the immigrants' sense of national identity. It also created tension between children and parents. The heads of the family saw ethnic diversity at work too. The old Irish and Germans saw ethnic diversity at work too. The new Eastern European immigrants were unskilled. After the turn of the century, blacks from the Deep South added to the mix, and in World War I, women began to appear. Hence, packing-house workers lived in a dangerous state of poverty and tension with their children; moreover, with the addition of their awful working conditions, they were ready to strike at any time.

Unions and strikes often failed to unite the skilled workers and the unskilled. The skilled workers often formed successful unions and strikes. The unskilled were often left unorganized. The butchers had a strong sense of unity. For example, during the strikes and riots of 1877, 500 butchers marched in formation to meet the police, earning a two dollar a day increase. About a year later, the first unions appeared. In the 1880s the Knights of Labor established a foothold in the meat-packing industry, organizing the yards and displaying an impressive Labor Day parade. Sadly, their demands for an eight-hour day failed. By December, following another unsuccessful strike, significant bitterness developed toward the Knights. A later union, the Packinghouse Employees' Union, also failed to organize the various skills. A club organized by cattle butchers, the Blackthorn Club, showed that the skilled cared mainly about protecting themselves. In 1894, another show of skilled organization was the strikes engaged in out of sympathy for railroad workers. Once again, the lack of organization prevented success. A breakthrough was made in the spring of 1900, when the Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen of North America arrived in Chicago. President Michael Donnelly established twenty-one locals that covered every worker. The main problem was organizing by jobs, rather than by the plant at which you worked. The unions also helped with ethnic divisions by allowing contact across

ethnic lines. The union leaders also hoped that they could raise the standard of living for all workers. Despite the union's short life, it did accomplish some of its goals.

The Jungle was written to expose the plight of meat-packing workers, but it did not accomplish that aim. The plight of the workers was lost in the general uproar created by its revelation of unsanitary meat. Author Sinclair later said, "I aimed for the public's heart and by accident hit in the stomach." Through his book, the general public learned that meat was being processed from a number of unhealthy materials. Meat sales declined greatly, as the public grew distrustful of meat-packing companies. *The Jungle* also started action within the government. President Theodore Roosevelt was already suspicious of the meat-packing companies. He had eaten their meat in Cuba during the Spanish-American War and had a very low opinion of its quality. He began pushing a meat-inspection bill in Congress. After it was passed in 1906, the public began to relax. The law put meat-packing companies under a greater degree of government control, but it did little to help the workers. Fortunately, the workers were not completely forgotten. Several new laws established standards for their working environment. Another effect of *The Jungle* was an increase in the power of the unions. Workers realized better than ever before how badly they were being treated. Despite its failure to directly accomplish his aims, Sinclair did not fail completely when he wrote *The Jungle*.

Clearly, the world Sinclair wrote about was awful. The workers lived in poverty; they were forced to rent out their own homes and send their children to work to survive. The meat-packing companies had become very powerful since the refrigerated rail car and were called "the greatest trust in the world." The power of the companies was displayed whenever a strike began. Strikes usually ended in failure. After all, the meat-packing companies had discovered it was cheaper to fight than to appease. *The Jungle* could not help the workers the way in which it was meant. With meat-packing's transformation into a large business, workers became very diverse

and protested their working conditions through strikes, becoming trapped in a situation *The Jungle* could not change. However, *The Jungle*'s failure was not complete.

[From James R. Barrett, *Work and Community in the Jungle*; Jason Inchiocca, "Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*;" http://www.albany.edu/proijenren/1998_1999/student.projects/18-19/lit/upton_sinclairs_the_jungle.htm, Oct. 5, 2002; Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle*.]

New Orient Coal Mine Disaster of 1951

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December 21, 1951, began no differently than any other pre-Christmas day in the rural coal-mining town of West Frankfort, Illinois. Everyone seemed to be in the Christmas spirit, especially the night shift workers of the Orient Coal Mine who were about to descend into the depths of the earth at 6:00 in the evening. Greeting them on a chalkboard outside the entrance of the mine was a message scripted: "Merry Christmas to the Night Crew." This was to be the last shift before the miners' Christmas vacation.

At approximately 7:40 P.M. all were busy doing their specified jobs when the blast occurred. Wilfred McDaniels, the night mine manager, was on top at the time checking his records for the shift, when he received the news that the power was off and there had to be something wrong because there was a lot of dust coming from the shafts. He immediately called John Foster, the superintendent of the mine; Arlie Cook, the mine manager, and the mine rescue crews. Tommy Haley, a repairman, called in from the telephone located in one of the sections of the mine and told McDaniels, "Something terrible has happened." The 133 uninjured miners from the unaffected sections of the mine headed for the surface.

Immediately following the phone call, 2,000 of the town's citizens were informed over the loud speaker at the local high school's basketball game about the explosion. Family members quickly rushed to the site anxiously waiting to hear the outcome. More than 218 rescue men worked through the night, but the miners themselves who made it out alive held little hope that any of the trapped men were alive. As rescuers were recovering dead bodies, they used the local

junior high school gymnasium as a temporary morgue. The only survivor of the 120 that were trapped was a man named Cecil Sanders. He endured a harsh and cold sixty hours trapped in the mine after the explosion. Sanders was reported as having enough carbon monoxide in his lungs to have killed any ordinary man, but according to the local physician, Sanders was far from ordinary since he was so used to the mining atmosphere. He was West Frankfort's own Christmas miracle. On Christmas Eve the death toll had reached 199 and the search for the cause of the explosion was underway. Federal, state, and company inspectors worked endlessly until December 27 trying to find out what caused this terrible accident.

Illinois Mines Director Walter Eadie said, "The explosion at the mine was definitely caused by methane gas." Federal inspectors had previously criticized some of the means employed by the company to control methane, but the company had ignored those federal recommendations. James Westfield, a United States Bureau of Miners official called the disaster "somebody's carelessness and an absolutely avoidable accident." Altogether, the inspectors found thirty-one violations of the Federal mine safety code. Many were relatively minor, but some were of such a nature as to "indicate serious hazards similar to those that had caused heavy loss of life or destruction of property."

This disaster, along with many others such as the Cherry Mine Disaster in Cherry, Illinois, and the Centralia Mine Disaster in Centralia, Illinois, attracted national attention due to the lack of proper ventilation systems. On July 16, 1952, President Harry S Truman signed the Federal Coal Mine Safety Act. This Act authorized mine inspectors to require any mine employing fifteen men or more to comply with mine safety provisions. This act allowed the federal government to shut down any mines that it thought were potentially dangerous. This gave the mine inspectors power to enforce the laws on any mine who did not meet the standards of the Safety Act. These new laws enforced mines to become better ventilated to control the

methane gas. It also helped control the floating coal dust by dusting the mine walls with a limestone compound. The Safety Act has been so effective that there has been only one other mine disaster in southern Illinois since it was passed.

The New Orient coal mine disaster of 1951 helped change mining history. This disaster helped the government realize that Illinois needed stricter safety regulations, and these stricter safety regulations saved lives. Due to the Federal Coal Mine Safety Act of 1952, mining became safer for all of Illinois' coal laborers.

[From Charles Edwin Hair, *Our Christmas Disaster*; *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, Dec. 23, 1951; *Southern Illinoisan*, Dec. 26, 1951, Dec. 27, 1951, Dec. 31, 1999; United States Department of Labor, "History of Mine Safety and Health Legislation," www.msha.gov/MSHAINFOR/MSHAINF2.HTM (Nov. 10, 2002); *Washington Post*, Dec. 23, 1951, Dec. 24, 1951.]

The Railway Strike of 1877

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Throughout the course of the industrial age in America, there have been many strikes and protests against unfair treatment of employees. The railway strike of 1877 is one example. Even though the strikers lost the strike, they won the war over unjust management in the labor unions. There were various dealings that led to the strike and numerous violent acts during the protests. Communal responses were very important in these dealings along with the impacts it made on the industry.

Many events that led up to the railway strike, including the depression that occurred in 1873. Numerous men were unemployed and sought jobs in the railroad industry. Most important was the unregulated trade in the railway industry that caused monopolies and fraud, giving the railroad tycoons even more power over the labor laws. In the three years before the strike, wage rates of employees were cut by thirty-five percent, and men were forced to work fifteen to eighteen hours a day. Usually they had to wait three or four months before they received their pay that was due monthly. In some areas, families were left with as little as thirty-five cents a day after travel and work expenses were taken out. During 1877, another ten percent was cut and the labor force was cut in half. This caused the employees to work twice as hard for less pay.

The strikes began on July 16, 1877, when forty men in Baltimore left their trains of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad. News of the strikes spread across the country, and by July 24, it expanded into the Michigan Central freight yards of Chicago. The next day a full blown battle

took place between police and protestors. Officials attacked the strikers with clubs and guns while arresting their leaders. Street cars were halted on the south side of the city, and sailors in the port walked out. A crowd of 8,000 massed at the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy roundhouse; it finally dispersed after three were killed and seven wounded. While waiting for troops requested from President Hayes and Illinois' Governor Cullom, 5,000 citizen volunteers were enrolled to patrol the area.

The Workingmen's Party in Chicago appointed an Executive Committee and attempted to gain control of the strike. The movement had the sympathy of the people in the city and the party encouraged workers to unite with the strikers. They also demanded that all industrial establishments shut down, but urged strikers to remain peaceable, yet firm in their protests.

On July 26, 10,000 assembled at the Halsted Street Viaduct. A police attack was beaten back until soldiers and mounted officers arrived. Twelve were killed in the battle while at least a hundred leaders of the movement were arrested. Between thirty and fifty men and women were killed in street fighting throughout the strike and at least a hundred wounded. The first freight train was sent east under military protection on July 28.

The public reaction to this crisis was mostly in favor of the strikers. The citizens had suffered through four years of depression previous to the incident, so they knew of the sufferings endured. Many of these civilians took part in rallies and riots of the railroad workers. On the other hand, the *New York Times* headline read "CITY IN POSSESSION OF COMMUNISTS." Though some newspapers opposed the strike, many helped in spreading propaganda for the rioters. Ministers and pastors also took part in the chaos. Reverend Henry Ward Beecher sarcastically preached on the low wages, "Men cannot live by bread, it is true; but the man who cannot live on bread and water is not fit to live."

By August 2, strikes around the country were halted by police, vigilantes, and government troops. Some railway companies had cancelled their wage cuts in order to prevent a strike once the news was spread; others gave in to the demands of the workers. Many companies fired employees and hired desperate, faithful workers in their place. Although few improvements were seen automatically proceeding the strike, it eventually called a halt to the railway industry's relentless wage cutting.

In conclusion, many people were killed all over the country in these violent protests for labor union rights. There were several events leading to the strike, and the strike itself was devastating. At hand was the popular support of the protests, but unexpectedly, the strike did not end in their favor. Railroads were very prominent in the nineteenth century, and there was an enormous amount of poverty stricken workers.

[From *Harper's Weekly*, Aug. 11, 1877, http://www.railroadextra.com/sk7711.html (Sept. 15, 2002); Paul Le Blanc, *The Railroad Strike of 1877*, http://www.pittsburghaflcio.org/railroad.html (Sept. 15, 2002); Milton Meltzer, *Bread-And Roses*; Jonathan Donald, "Rediscovering America: Railroads, Robbers, and Rebels;" Samuel Yellen, *American Labor Struggles*.]

The Cherry Mine Disaster and its effects on Labor and Labor Unions in the United States

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One of the most terrible mine disasters in the United States happened in the small Illinois town of Cherry. It is still a haunting memory. A large pyramid stands on the ruins of what was once a coal mine, ranked the third worst coal mine disaster in the United States and the worst coal mine fire. It most definitely should not have happened and was an accident.

During the early years of mining, the state government did not have very many safety requirements or procedures and mining companies showed little or no concern for the safety of their employees. Bituminous coal companies had been organized in 1861, during the Civil War. Anthracite miners in Pennsylvania started seven years later. In the late 1880s there were six organized labor unions in the United States. By 1909 there were one hundred and seventy-one unions with more than two million members. The nineteen-year-old United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) was a very strong union. The main interest of the UMWA was creating a fair wage scale in order that wages would be the same all over the country. This stopped coal companies from decreasing wages to gain unfair advantages over their competitors. Also the miners paid little attention to safety because they were hurrying to get as much work done as possible. This is understandable because they were paid by how much they did per day. Wounded or even killed workmen had limited financial liability.

The history of the St. Paul Mine is an interesting one. The town of Cherry was one of the St. Paul Coal Company's creations. The town, the school, the park, and the mine were all created by the coal company at a cost of $200,000. The St. Paul Mine was the first mine with electricity.

It was made of steel, concrete, brick, and stone and had the largest coal shaft. It was known all over the world as a safe mine which was supposedly fireproof. Immigrants came to work there from Austria, Belgium, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Poland, Scotland, Sweden, Yugoslavia, and the United States. They had responded to advertisements for workers in search of a better life. Some Americans were threatened and rejected the immigrants who worked a lot harder than they did and sometimes got jobs when they did not. Miners received $2.50 a day, roughly equal to $45 in the present, and, in addition, they had to pay for their own tools and to sharpen them.

No one would expect such a state-of-the-art mine to end in a disaster. The underground tunnels in the Illinois coal mines were always dark, dirty, and dangerous. The miners worked in total darkness. They often crouched for hours chipping coal from small spaces where they could not fully stand. For eight hour shifts they breathed poisonous fumes and coal dust which damaged their lungs. Examples of the disaster that occurred in mines included underground explosions, the flooding of the shafts, the spread of poisonous gases or fire.

Fire and toxic gases caused the Cherry Coal Mine Disaster. At 7:00 A.M., on November 13, 1909, 480 men and boys descended into the mine, in some cases, 500 feet underground. The electrical system had broken down so they used kerosene torches. Around lunch time several bales of hay were dropped down the hoist to feed the mules that pulled carts of coal. Mat Francesco, age 15, and another man pushed a hay cart over to the stable area but it came to rest under an open torch. Soon it caught on fire which began to spread rapidly.

Many tales of unbelievable pain followed. A group of miners 500 feet below ground built a wall of mud, rocks, and timbers to block off the deadly gases. After eight days they could not stand it. They tore down the barricades and crawled around the tunnels until they found a search party. Twenty-one men from that group survived. As soon as the State Mine Experiment

and Mine Life Saving Station at the University of Illinois at Urbana heard about the disaster, they sent rescue equipment and help because there was little at the site. But by the end of the first day, 259 men and boys had died.

What happened after this terrifying incident? Before the Cherry Mine Disaster, the state regulated mining. A month later President William Howard Taft was expected to encourage Congress to create a federal bureau of mines in order to prevent similar accidents. The United States Bureau of Mines was created in 1910. Illinois Governor Charles S. Deneen called a special legislative session to consider an employer's liability law to make sure that companies would be held responsible for harm to miners. He also required mine owners to purchase and maintain firefighting equipment and to employ certain workers to pass certification exams. They also gave $100,000 for relief funds and built three mine rescue stations. The United Mine Workers of American in Illinois demanded that child labor laws were enforced so that mine inspectors had to make sure that working children were the ages they said they were. All ten boys employed in the Cherry Mine, including the one who started the fire, were hired illegally, before they had turned sixteen. Four were killed in the fire.

The United Mine Workers of America donated $1,800 to families affected by the disaster. Many performed other acts of kindness. A memorial was erected on the site and a monument to those who died stands in the center of the graveyard. Items related to the incident are in the Cherry Public Library.

At present, more and more efforts to make mines safer are being initiated. There are also many strikes by miners to get higher pay. This is exemplified in the movie "October Sky." Recently, eight miners were trapped in a flooded mine in Pennsylvania. All they had to survive on were a few sandwiches and a can of soda. The man who had this lunch shared it with his fellow workers so all of them would survive. Also, all of the miners tied themselves with rope so

if one of them became unconscious, another could pull the person up so they would not drown. All of them survived. These acts of kindness and heroism have stimulated many people of this country to make mines safer.

All in all, many people were affected by the Cherry Mine Disaster. Hundreds of women were widowed and five hundred children were orphaned. The Cherry Mine Disaster was definitely one of the most depressing and horrible accidents ever in a coal mine but the country handled it well, making mining safer.

[From Illinois Labor History Society, "Story of the Great Cherry Mine Disaster," www.kentlaw.edu/ilhs/cherrymi.htm (Oct. 7, 2002); Karen Tintori, *Trapped*; University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Institute of Labor & Industrial Relations, "Cherry Mine Disaster," www.ilir.uiuc.edu/lii/landmark.html#Cherry (Oct. 7,2002).]

A Union is Formed

Amanda Parsons-Twesten

Belleville Township High School West, Belleville

Teacher: Melissa Schmitt-Crafton

With current events such as teacher dismissals, student unrest, and student strikes, one might think that it was the 1960s. However, the year was 1935, and the place was Belleville Township High School in Belleville, Illinois.

On Thursday, May 23, 1935, the board of education at Belleville Township High School held a meeting to take care of regular school district business. At this meeting, six teachers were not re-employed for the following year by a vote four to two. Although the board members thought that they were taking care of business as usual, they did not realize how their decision would affect the community in the following week and decades that followed.

On Friday, May 24, 1935, the word was out about the six teachers not being rehired. Around noon, the students held a general meeting on the steps of the auditorium of Belleville Township High School. After several students stated their concerns at the rally, it was decided to attend classes that day. However, they decided not to attend classes the following Monday. Homer Weidman, president of the class of 1935 stated, "We (the students) just felt the action taken by the board (the dismissal of the six teachers) was very unfair."

For three days, a majority of the students did not report to classes. For all intents and purposes, the school was shut down. Jane Hansleben, who in 1935 was a student at the nearby Union Grade School and who years later would be a teacher at the high school, remembers clearly when the high school students went on strike at Belleville Township High School. "I was

so amazed. We (the students) all wanted to look out the classroom windows at the students who were so upset, but our teacher would not let us."

A special board meeting was held the following Wednesday night. It was attended by about 600 individuals, including mostly former graduates, parents of students and "students who had gone out on strike because of the dismissal of the teachers." The meeting started in Super-Intendent-Principal Henry G. Schmidt's office, but was moved to the auditorium "so the people who had congregated in the corridors could hear. Arthur Buesch (a board member) and Arthur Spoeneman (chairman of the teachers committee) opposed the move, but when the audience pressed its demands vociferously, the meeting place was transferred."

During the two-and-one-half hour session, the board of education "adopted a resolution declaring illegal, null and void the action taken by the board" at its previous meeting on May 23, which had dismissed six teachers for no valid reasons. Teachers were being favored who had been active in the board's election campaign. In one instance, Schmidt had promised a job to his daughter, who was going to replace one of the released teachers. Also, "the resolution declared that proper notice of the purpose of the meeting twenty-four hours in advance, as provided in the rules of the board had not been given."

"The strike ended when strike leaders, informed of Wednesday night's meeting of the board, urged all the students to return to their classes after Schmidt had assured the strikers that they would not be penalized." The students attended a normal day of school on Friday after an "extra holiday" on Thursday.

About seven months after the student walk out in May, the faculty of fifty-two teachers at Belleville Township High School met Saturday afternoon in December 1935. The purpose of the meeting was to elect new officers and to organize the chapter of the American Federation of Teachers. They would affiliate themselves with the American Federation of Labor. It was

decided that dues would be one dollar per month for the time being but would later be collected on a "sliding scale, subject to the amount of individual incomes."

The *Belleville Daily Advocate* reported that "affiliation of the high school teachers with a union labor marked the first move by educators in this vicinity. A number of unsuccessful attempts had been made in the past by labor leaders to organize teachers as well as the St. Clair County Teachers' Institute."

Another article in the *Belleville Daily Advocate* stated "the decision of the high school teachers to join the American Federation of Labor was the result of deliberations which began last spring when the student body walked out on a strike in protest to the discharge of a number of teachers by the high school board of education. At that time, the teachers discussed the possibility of labor affiliation in relation to protection against future similar action by the board."

On January 22, 1936, the board of education of Belleville Township High School received the regulations governing the American Federation of Teachers for Local 434 at their regular meeting. It stated the purpose, aims and objectives of the American Federation of Teachers were as follows:

The American Federation of Teachers, Local 434, has been organized for the teachers of the Belleville Township High School under a charter November 18, 1935.

The American Federation of Teachers is a national organization affiliated with the American Federation of Labor. It is founded on the motto: 'Democracy in Education. Education for Democracy.'

The objects of the American Federation of Teachers in 1935 were as follows:

1. To bring associations of teachers into relations of mutual assistance and cooperation.
2. To obtain for them all the rights to which they are entitled.

3. To raise the standard of the teaching profession by securing the conditions essential to the best professional service.
4. To promote such a democratization of the schools as will enable them better to equip their pupils to take their places in the industrial, social and political life of the community.
5. To protect public education.

One former Belleville Township High School teacher and very active current member of the union, Nina Bono, believes, "the reason for the founding of the union was to create some sort of policy that could be written down. The board and the teachers wanted to make an agreement on how to avoid similar situations. Although these were main reasons, the strike did help (to cause the union to form)."

Teachers in other school districts learned from the Belleville Township High School District situation. They too began to form unions in their districts. Eventually the Illinois Federation of Teachers was formed, which began to handle matters statewide. The unfair treatment of the teachers had showed them that they had more strength in numbers when organized—a lesson learned by workers everywhere.

[From *Belleville News Democrat*, May 31, 1935, Dec. 23, 1936, Jan. 23, 1936; student historian's interview with Nina Bono, Nov. 3, 2002; student historian's interview with Jane Hansleben, Oct. 28, 2002; student historian's interview with Homer Weidman, Nov. 2, 2002.]

Mary Harris Jones: A Union Crusader

Emily Renschen

All Saints Academy, Breese

Teacher: Stephanie Garcia

Although labor unions are very popular today, they were rarely mentioned in the 1800s. Mary Harris helped change that. In 1830, Mary was born in Cork, Ireland. Little did her parents know that their child would grow up to be a real hero. Mary Harris, also known as Mother Jones, changed the world's perspective on labor unions.

Ireland was experiencing a war as Mary grew up. She witnessed many horrifying events, the killing of many men, women, and children. Her father fled to America searching for freedom. Later he sent for his family, and in 1841, the family was reunited, settling in Toronto, Canada. After Mary finished school, she found a teaching position at a convent in Monroe, Michigan. She taught there for several years before moving to Chicago, Illinois, where she found it was very difficult to earn a living. After living in Chicago for only two years, she moved to Memphis, Tennessee. There she married and had four children. In 1867, a yellow fever epidemic swept through Memphis, killing hundreds, including Mary's husband and four children. In 1867, Mary moved back to Chicago and opened a successful dressmaking shop.

In 1871, despite her good fortune, Mary lost all of her belongings in the Great Chicago Fire. She lost her dressmaking establishment, and had no idea where to turn. She heard about a labor organization called the Knights of Labor in Pennsylvania. Mary decided to go to a meeting and see if she liked it. She attended one of the meetings and was greatly inspired by the speakers. The powerful words spoken stimulated Mary to dedicate her life to the labor cause and help resolve labor problems. After several meetings, Mother Jones began working for the

Knights of Labor full time. She, herself, was able to inspire hundreds of laborers to defend themselves during strikes and disputes.

In 1891, Mary traveled to Norton, Virginia, to help striking coal miners. Many of the strikes were part of a new union, the United Mine Workers of America, founded in late 1889. This was the very first coal mining strike. Mary helped with it and learned it would take time to find a solution. Mary had always thought mining was cruel work. The men labored twelve to fourteen hours a day, six days a week, in dark, bottomless pits underneath the ground. Mary thought the rights of the coal miners were being violated since the men were not able to hold mining meetings or be interrupted even during breaks. As Mary was trying to resolve the situation, she received a warning that she would be killed if she did not leave Norton, Virginia, immediately. She was labeled a unionist, and in those days, unionists were not thought of highly. However, being the independent woman she was, Mary stayed in Norton until her job was done. She even joined the United Mine Workers organizers, even though she was not an official of the union. However, striking coal miners did not benefit from the strike. The miners received no recognition from the strike, and the ones involved in the strike lost their jobs.

In the spring of 1920, with many strikes behind her, Mary set out for California to visit a friend. While there, reporters were eager to speak with her about her career. Mary granted the reporters several interviews.

Troubled by sickness and old age, Mary wrote her autobiography. She retired to Silver Springs, Maryland, where she died on November 30, 1930. Her body was brought to Mt. Olive, Illinois, on a special train. She was laid to rest in the Mt. Olive Miners Cemetery. Over twenty thousand people came to mourn and honor the life of Mary Harris Jones.

[From Edward Steel, *The Court-Martial of Mother Jones*; Dale Fetherling, *Mother Jones, The Miners' Angel*; Linda Atkinson, *Mother Jones*.]

The Memorial Day Massacre of 1937

Aisha Wahid

Jamieson School, Chicago

Teachers: Robert Newton and Jacobeth Turlow

The Great Depression of the 1930s affected Americans severely. Many workers were laid off and had their wages slashed. In 1933 the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA) was passed, devised to help industry, labor, and the unemployed. It has been called the "Magna Carta of Labor." The National Recovery Act gave laborers the authority to unionize and negotiate collectively through representatives they chose. In 1935, the NIRA was declared unconstitutional because strikes across the country had become common. Since Congress was still sympathetic to the newly developed labor unions, the Wagner Act was passed to maintain the rights of the workers.

Despite the many hardships faced by the steel industry, there were still revisions to come. In November 1935 the Committee for Industrial Organization (CIO) was established. The American Federation of Labor (AFL) strongly opposed the principles of the CIO. The AFL believed that workers should join individual unions and then bargain with management separately. On the contrary, the CIO urged all laborers to unite into a single union. Since steelworkers had experienced complications under the AFL, they were ready to try a new approach. Steelworkers became one of the first worker groups to begin unionizing under the Wagner Act, after being encouraged by the CIO.

The Steelworkers Organizing Committee (SWOC) was founded on June 17, 1936. Companies were satisfied with individual alliances between separate unions that existed under the AFL. After lengthy strife for further recognition within the steel industry, "Big Steel," the

United States Steel Corporation endorsed the SWOC. The contract permitted five-dollar wages per day in addition to a forty-hour week of labor. By May 1937, 110 firms had approved contracts, but particular companies refused to cooperate. In response, SWOC called its first strike involving 25,000 workmen against the Jones and Laughlin Steel Corporation. The union won after a labor board election.

Despite the tremendous victory, some of the "Little Steel" companies including Bethlehem Steel, Republic Steel, Inland Steel, and Youngstown Sheet & Tube, refused to approve the contract with SWOC. Tom Girdler, chairman of the Board of Republic Steel, was an exceptionally prominent anti-union spokesperson among the many company leaders.

On May 26, 1937, SWOC decided to strike three of the "Little Steel" companies, Republic, Youngstown Sheet & Tube, and Inland. Nearly all of the plants refrained from production during the strike, but Republic Steel resisted and refused to close all of its plants. It even housed nonunion employees in the plant so production could proceed without the disturbance of picket lines outside. The Republic Steel South Chicago Plant was one of these plants, from which half the employees had joined the strike.

On May 26, when demonstrations began, police tried to prevent workers from joining the cause. Police Captain James Mooney broke up the line and arrested 23 people who refused to move. The rest were forced two blocks away from the plant, to 117th Street. Due to this conduct, the police no longer played an impartial part in the strike, but were evidently supportive of Republic Steel.

The strike headquarters were set up at Sam's Place, a former dance hall at 113th and Green Bay Avenue. Chicago mayor, Edward J. Kelley, acknowledged peaceful picketing in the Chicago *Tribune*.

The next day another attempt was made to picket. Protestors marched from Sam's Place to 117th Street and continued west towards Burley Avenue. When they reached Buffalo, a great mass of police officers awaited. The marchers continued forward and fighting broke out. The police clubbed the strikers and a few drew revolvers without orders. They discharged them into air to keep the demonstrators forewarned of their ability. No one had been killed as the day ended, but there were several bloody heads. May 28 was a quiet day, but the picketers were upset with the police conduct.

Nick Fontecchio, a union leader, called a mass meeting at Sam's Place the next day, Memorial Day Sunday. An anonymous report was sent to Captain Mooney stating that on Sunday an attempt would be made to raid the plant and drive out the remaining non-union workers. Without checking the rumor, Mooney stationed 264 police officers at the Republic Steel Mill.

It was a very frightening day for the thousands that had gathered for the mass demonstration, not knowing what the police were going to do. "Somehow the event, the holiday, the sunshine, and the warm weather made the festive air persist," according to one account. The demonstrators started marching and later decided to change position before going down Green Bay Avenue. The marchers met the police line and demanded that their rights to picket be recognized. The police refused, but the picketers persisted for several minutes, while arming themselves with rocks and branches.

Police blocked the strikers and some began to retreat. Then a stick flew from the back of the line towards the police. Instantaneously, tear gas bombs were thrown at the marchers and other objects were thrown back at the police. Without orders, several policemen drew their revolvers and fired at some picketers. "Get off the field, or I'll put a bullet in your back!" one demonstrator, Mollie West recalls. Using their clubs, the police beat anyone in their path,

including women and children. Four marchers were killed, six later died in the hospital, and thirty others suffered gunshot wounds. There were minor police casualties with thirty-five reported injuries.

In 1942, under legal pressure, the "Little Steel" companies signed their first contracts with the new United Steelworkers of America. The Memorial Day Massacre of 1937 is known as the blackest day in history, but it helped the steelworkers accomplish a lot for themselves and future laborers.

[From Howard Fast, "Memorial Day Massacre," http://www.trussel.com/hf/memorial.htm (Nov. 7, 2002); "Memorial Day Massacre," http://www.kentlaw.edu/ilhs/memorial.htm (Nov. 7, 2002); student historian's interview with Linh Orear, Oct. 24, 2002; "The Memorial Day Massacre of 1937," http://www.uhigh.ilstu.edu/soc/labor/memorial_day_massacre.htm (Nov. 7, 2002); Illinois Labor History Society, "The Memorial Day Massacre of 1937," 1975 (Filmstrip); student historian's interview with Mollie West, Oct. 24, 2002.]